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ABSTRACT

During the last 15 years, Chicano literature has not only repeated some of the topics of Mexican literature, but has added many more. Similar to Mexican literature, Chicano literature deals with: the pains, trials, and common experiences of childhood; the loss of religion, as traditional Catholicism confronts the changing needs and desires of the Chicano's new realities; the agricultural experience; problems of survival in a hostile society; a search for personal and group identity; and rites of passage and loss of innocence. The first three subjects are original to Chicano authors; the final three, although overlapping with other literatures, are always given a unique setting or solution. Although Chicano writing has not developed the varied themes present in Mexican literature, its basic and most original theme is that "man's dreams and plans are brutally shattered when they conflict with the established order of society." Despite this elemental theme of broken ideals, much of Chicano prose is theme-less. Although Mexican writing has been regarded as the most "innovative and demanding in the creation of new literary techniques", Chicano literature has been particularly adept in the creation of the child narrator. Thus, Chicano literature has achieved significant and lasting interpretation of unique human experiences and a laudable originality that will soon florish into first-rate literature. (Author/NQ)

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The Originality of Chicano Literature: A Comparison with Contemporary Mexican Writing

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Similar to the plight of the non-integrated Mexican American, Chicano writers have created a "literature in search of identity"; one which straddles the fence between North American and Mexican letters. Although written in the United States, usually in English or "pocho," Chicano literature cannot mesh well with traditional North American literature. Its authors hail from a different background and social experience and do not link themselves with the traditions of most North American writers. Chicano literature obviously finds roots in Mexican belles-lettres and derives inspiration from that model. Yet neither language, subject matter, nor theme harmonize fully with Mexican literature. Feeling rejected by both the Anglo American and the Mexican, the Chicano writer himself has rejected both literary traditions,[1] desiring to find identity in the newness of self expression. Chicano literature, broadly defined as literature written by North Americans of Mexican descent, has now reached such quantity and quality that it must be examined as an autonomous body, existing between and among two other strong literatures. Literature, here defined as artistic re-creation of significant human experience, by Chicano writers explores and re-creates human experiences heretofore not viewed in literature. One Chicano writer affirms that to reproduce these new realities, "Chicano literature must reflect the multiple experiences of the Mexican American and explore a multiplicity of Mexican American themes . . . and must be from the point of view of an inside

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participant."[2]

To listen to these new voices (those of Chicano writers and critics) is to be confidently assured that a completely independent Chicano literature exists. Yet what makes it unique? How is Chicano writing any different from Steinbeck's Tortilla Flat or Harvey Fergusson's Rio Grande? Or how does it differ from Fuentes' La Región mas transparente, Rulfo's El llano en llamas or Gustavo Sainz's Gazapo? The present study examines three major elements of literary creation as they appear in various Chicano writings, in an attempt to determine what, if any, originality is present. Mexican literature of the Twentieth century provides the contrastive background for the study. By nature this examination is general and cannot refer to every novel or story written by Chicanos and Mexicans.

SUBJECT MATTER

Contemporary Mexican literature deals with the subjects of the Revolution (1919-1917) and its effects on contemporary society, a search for, and an attempt to define national identity, the indigenous past, the conquest and its continuation in the present, the life of the peasant, experiences of a youthful maturity, death, the changes resulting from rural to urban living, etc.[3] The subject matter of Chicano literature during the last fifteen years repeats some of these topics but adds many more, therefore, its originality. The (1) pains, trials and common experiences of childhood form the basic and most original subject matter of Chicano writing. No other literature in the Spanish tradition (with the possible exception of Spain's Ana María Matute) so thoroughly develops child psychology and experience. Bless Me, Ultima recounts the formative experiences of a young boy during his first two years of school. Most of the stories in Tomás Rivera's "...y no se lo tragó la tierra" poignantly

deal with children, their sufferings and feelings as they begin to experience the larger world beyond their homes. Villarreal's Pocho follows the early years of an oversensitive child to the point where he finally considers himself a man. Similar subject matter appears in Ernesto Galarza's Barrio Boy, Richard Vásquez's Chicano as well as numerous poems and short stories. While some negative criticism could be leveled at this type of writing as little more than the authors' memories of childhood experiences, it nevertheless affords the reader the most expeditious way of feeling the suffering of the Chicano; a child in pain draws much more on the heartstrings than a suffering adult.

A second basic subject is the (2) loss of religion, as traditional Catholicism confronts the changing needs and desires of the Chicano's new realities. Antonio (Bless Me, Ultima) sees "curanderismo" and childhood fantasy assume supremacy over the Virgin and the priests. Like most of the young protagonists he does not openly deny the religion but merely lets it dip to a secondary or terciary role in determining his values. The conflict that religious laxity (by youth) produces in the older generation is also vital new subject matter, seen in this novel as well as Barrio Boy, Pocho and in "Primera Comunión" by Rivera. Much of Chicano poetry expresses a yearning for a simpler life, one of faith and hope, now lost in the new assimilated society.

It almost goes without saying that the subject and backdrop of much Chicano literature is the (3) agricultural experience. While this is not a complete break from Mexican letters (the short stories of Juan Rulfo and others) it is nevertheless so extensive that it at first appears to be the only subject matter of Chicano writing. The originality here stems from a lack of identification with the land; the migrant is

working the fields of another and has lost spiritual contact with Mother Earth. Related to this concern is the problem of the activist, perhaps an old revolutionary (Pocho or Nick Vaca's story "The Visit") who is forced into the subjugated life of a day laborer. The resulting internal conflict, rebellion, and resignation are subjects dealt with in Richard Barrio's The Plum Plum Pickers, Vásquez's Chicano, most of Rivera's stories (especially "On the Road to Texas: Pete Fonesca" in Aztlán) and Alurista's collection of poetry, Floricanto en Aztlán.

Similar to Mexican literature (as well as much contemporary North American prose) Chicano writing deals with (4) problems of survival in a hostile society (Pocho, Chicano), (5) a search for personal and group identity (Rudolfo Gonzáles' epic "I am Joaquín/Yo soy Joaquín," excellent portrayal in Antonio's conflict in Bless Me, Ultima, in Alurista, etc.), and (6) rites of passage and loss of innocence. In sum, the first three subjects discussed are original to Chicano authors; the final three, although overlapping with other literatures, are always given a unique setting or solution. Rodolfo Gonzáles' search for identity, for example, is the Mexican intellectual search (Cuautémoc - Cortés - Hidalgo - Juárez) as well as the Mexican-American (Laborer, activist, La Raza, etc.).

> I am Joaquín
> lost in a world of confusion,
> caught up in the whirl of a
> gringo society,
> confused by the rules
> scorned by attitudes...

THEME

Related to the subject matter in literature is theme, the unifying generalization about life postulated or portrayed in a work of art. The basic and most original theme of Chicano literature is that man's dreams

and plans are brutally shattered when they conflict with the established order of society. Hence frustration, despair, and hopelessness pervade Chicano letters. A similar theme predominates Mexican literature --- lack of fulfillment of the ideals of the Mexican Revolution (Carlos Fuentes, Agustín Yáñez, Rosario Castellanos, Sergio Fernández). But Mexican literature expounds the failure of the establishment, of national goals, of national identity. Chicano literature, on the other hand, is much more intimate, human-centered; the tragedy is personal rather than national. A boy is expelled from school for a fight he didn't start ("Es que duele," Rivera); a child is senselessly killed by a greedy rancher ("Los niños no se aguantaron," Rivera); sons go off to war and return only to say "goodbye," forsaking the family's ways (Bless Me, Ultima, Pocho); farm workers are taken advantage of, losing all hope to improve self and family (The Plum Plum Pickers). The heart-felt tragedy of thwarted individuals, human beings with too little chance to achieve is the overriding theme of current Chicano literature. It must be noted that Chicano writing has not developed the varied themes present in Mexican literature. The experience of the downtrodden, the isolated, thwarted individual has been so strong that it has dominated thematic concerns of Chicano literary expression.

Shattered dreams also include loss of honor in the fight for survival (Floyd Salas' Tattoo the Wicked Cross, Chicano). The novel Pocho relates the story of Juan Rubio, an ex-revolutionary escaped to the United States. It is apparent as he resigns himself to fruit picking that he has lost the honor once granted him; yet the novelist chooses to follow the plight of the family's only son, ignoring the adjustments and anguish of the father. Such a course weakens the possible psychological impact

of the work. Too frequently the internal anguish of the Chicano literary character is left unexplored, in favor of the external struggles for justice.

The future of the Chicano is also shattered by mistrust and betrayal. At times it is the classical conflict: typical "gringo" betrays and abandons the Chicana he's gotten pregnant (Chicano). But most writers are wise enough not to follow such a stereotyped, facile dilemma and in so doing contribute to the originality of Chicano literature. Doña Marina's neurotic fear and outdated pride cause her to betray her niece Lina into the hands of a quack doctor for a supposed abortion -- Chicano betrays Chicano ("A Rosary for Doña Marina" by Octavio Romano and Herminio Ríos). One's own Raza betrays him! The boy Antonio (Bless Me, Ultima) is placed in a situation analogous to Greek tragedy -- his father's blood and heritage urge him to be a llanero; his mother's kin and traditions push him toward farming. This insolvable conflict can only result in betrayal to the ideals of one or both parents. Children are placed in similar situations in Pocho and Barrio Boy, forced to betray and shatter the hopes of mother and/or father. This type of betrayal conflict normally results from the new life styles the Chicano must follow: mother pushes for integration and education; father for tradition and machismo.

Despite this elemental theme of broken ideals, it must honestly be said that much of Chicano prose is theme-less. Just as the everyday life of man likely has no unifying theme, much of Chicano literature is little more than an "inside participant" recalling life experiences. Too many prose writers have failed in the artistic selection, arrangement and development of details, events and characters. Hence they are unable to wring a powerful and original theme from their writing, and the reader

is left both searching and yearning for some unifying human truth on which to form opinions.

LITERARY TECHNIQUES

Of the many national literatures in Latin America, Mexican writing during the last twenty years has been regarded as the most "innovative and demanding with respect to the creation of new literary techniques."[4] Hence, when viewed in the light of Mexican literature, Chicano writing would seem hard-pressed to come up with "something new." Yet despite this difficulty innovations have been wrought in at least two important areas: point of view and structure.

Commencing with Rulfo's Pedro Páramo and continuing through younger writers like Gustavo Sainz (Gazapo), the narrator in Mexican prose has become a rather non-descript, floating personage, changing point of view, time and space as he sees fit. Such a narrator purposefully tenders a heterogenous, confused view of the world. Chicano literature on the contrary has evolved an intrisic, first person narrator, one who can bear personal and sincere witness to the events he recounts. As one critic has observed, much of Chicano writing is purely experiential, a mature individual looking back, recalling his own life.[5] As such it is most appropriate that a personalized narrator bring his world to the reader. Chicano literature has been particularly adept in the creation of the child narrator. The warmth and intimacy created by a young narrator, often with an overly adult perspective, is not surpassed in any literature. The reader cannot help but be drawn into the created world by this internal point of view. In Bless Me, Ultima Antonio confides: "The new shoes felt strange to [my] feet that had run bare for almost seven years;" "'The war is terrible...' my grandfather said. I thought God must look

that way when He is angry." "I dreamed about the owl that night, and my dream was good. La Virgen de Guadalupe...." The reader of such a story freely enters into the life of the characters, feeling the honesty and candor generated by the child narrator. Even though many novels opt for the more omniscient third person narrator, through much dialogue and personal confession by one or several characters, they achieve a similar intimate feeling of closeness and confidence in the subject matter. Chicano, Barrio Boy and Pocho are excellent examples of this technique; by mixing frequent first person speech and experience with third person narration, the reader feels that he is being let in on innermost confidences, heretofore told to no one. Such a narrator indeed weaves a tight web of interest around the reader, one that urges him to continue reading and hoping for more prose from the same author.

The same technique is repeated in the Chicano short story: a somewhat naive, first person, intimate narrator brings what appears to be his own story to the reader. Rivera's "Primera Comunión" is likely the finest example, where a young lad seemingly confesses to the reader his doubts and worldly thoughts regarding Communion. The subject of weakening and loss of religious belief is nowhere more convincing than from a youngster who begins to doubt, finding that his childhood inculcations no longer order and explain the world: "Hasta se me olvidó que le había echado mentiras al padre. Y luego me sentía lo mismo que cuando había oído hablar al misionero acerca de la gracia de Dios [confusion]. Tenía ganas de saber más." Other stories by the same author ("La noche que apagaron las luces," "La mano en la bolsa," "On the Road to Texas: Pete Fonesca," etc.) very capably develop an unaffected, candid narrator, not fully capable of understanding the world but capable of observing injustices

and inconsistencies. Nick Vaca's "The Week of the Life of Manuel Hernández: Diary," Americo Paredes' "The Hammon and the Beans," and Amado Muro's "Cecilia Rosas" also come to the reader via an unsophisticated, fully believable narrator, recounting events as they seemingly happened to him. Such a point of view in fiction greatly enhances the verisimilitude and emotional power of the story.

Chicano poetry, more so than its counterpart in Mexico, has similarly been written from the intrinsic, personal point of view. Most of the novels here discussed, as well as the short stories, are written and published in English; they are meditated, rational expositions of Chicano conflict and experience. The poetry, to the contrary, usually comes to the reader in Spanish (or a later bilingual edition), a more intimate, emotional reaction to life than prose. When expressing feelings and emotion the poet seemingly returns to the most subjective period of his life, childhood, and the language he heard and spoke at that time. As an expression of personal sentiments, Chicano poetry also employs the "I-witness" narrator (often called the poetic voice, in poetry). "I Am Joaquín/Yo soy Joaquín," for example, in the Bantam edition, carries a cover picture of two young adolescents as if one of them were the storyteller. The poem is a type of confession, testimony, accusation and personal anguish for all Chicanos; the narrator effects this identification for the reader who immediately sympathizes with him. Nephtali de Leon's Chicano Poet, Ricardo Sanchez's Canto y Grito Mi Liberación, Alurista's Floricanto en Aztlán, and many other books of poetry are replete with the intimate, unaffected simple narration in first person.

A second technical contribution, less extensive but likely more significant, is the originality of literary form and structure. Crossing

traditional bounds between the novel and the short story, Rivera's "... y no se lo trag6 la tierra" unifies thirteen short stories into a single grouping that produces an effect similar to a novel, more than a disjointed collection of short stories. To further blur horizons between literary genres each story is preceded by a brief sketch or introductory paragraph that gives unity, purpose and setting, causing the narration that follows to mesh with previous and future stories. Hence the reader not only enjoys involvement with individual stories; he is forced to discover relationships that at first may not be obvious. Such participation requires that the reader become a closer part of the created world.

Barrio's novel, The Plum Plum Pickers, has been criticized for its broken, often preachy narrative. Yet it too is experimenting with form. Somewhat the opposite of Rivera, the writer has created a novel that is composed of related short stories. With the exception of the vitriolic preachment of chapter eighteen, the other thirty-three chapters are short vignettes and sketches revolving around agricultural harvests. Each has a separate unity which eventually ties into the thematic structure of the whole work. While the result here is not as successful as in Rivera, the attempt at originality in narrative structure must be praised.

Chicano literature is still very new! It has existed in newspapers, popular ballads, etc. for centuries of course, but only in the last fifteen years has it been seriously studied and criticized. To assume that it has reached its maturity is to expect too much. There are still numerous stylistic and technical difficulties that must be perfected: (1) The writing often attempts to be too lyrical, with an over-emphasis on adjectivation. (2) Works frequently lack a unifying focus, one which

would remedy the problem of weak or absent theme, already noted. (3) Chicano writing is too often directed at the cruel North American "gabacho," rather than serving the function of self-development and self-knowledge. (4) Too many stories are mere "cuadros de costumbre," picturesque sketches that describe a person or place but fail to develop character or plot. (5) Psychological penetration of human anguish and aspiration is limited to too few stories, often neglected in favor of frontal attack on "the system." (6) Novelistic development is generally lineal and experiential; few writers have produced more than one novel, having seemingly run out of imaginative material beyond their own lives. (7) The female experience, told by a woman writer, has not been developed. Yet despite these problems Chicano literature has already achieved significant and lasting interpretation of unique human experiences and a laudable originality that will soon flourish into first-rate literature.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Leal, Luis. "Mexican American Literature: A Historical Perspective." Revista Chicano-Riqueña 1, i (1973): 34.

2. Rivera, Thomas. "Into the Labyrinth: The Chicano in Literature." New Voices in Literature: The Mexican American. Edinburg, Texas. Pan American University Press, 1971. p. 22.

3. Critical works consulted in compiling this list include:
   Joseph Sommers. After the Storm. U. New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1968.
   Walter M. Langford. The Mexican Novel Comes of Age. U. Norte Dame Press, Indiana, 1971.
   John S. Brushwood. Mexico in its Novel. U. Texas Press, Austin, 1966.

4. Curiously enough, this statement was made by a Chilean author at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, March 21, 1970.

5. McKenna, Teresa. "Three Novels: An Analysis." Aztlan: Chicano Journal of the Social Sciences and the Arts." I, ii (Fall, 1970): 47.